

# Class and Education in the Celtic Tiger

**Deirdre Cronin**

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in the Celtic Tiger  
by Deirdre Cronin***

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Socialist Workers Party,  
PO Box 1648  
Dublin 8  
(01) 872 2682  
swp@clubi.ie, www.clubi.ie/swp

## **Introduction**

In the 1980s newly qualified teachers faced little option but to emigrate in order to find work. It was virtually impossible to get a permanent job as annual spending on education was cut dramatically during a period of deep recession. One large teacher training college was shut down. Classrooms were overcrowded and teachers were forced to fight to defend their pay and to protect their students against the worst excesses of government cut backs.

Fifteen years later newly qualified teachers can walk into permanent jobs. There is a huge shortage of teachers because seriously inadequate rates of pay have caused many to leave teaching altogether. We are in the midst of a prolonged boom yet the average teacher can no longer even dream of buying a house, many are forced to supplement their income with second jobs and future pay rises look like they will be tied to productivity. Class sizes are among the largest in Europe, schools remain inadequately resourced and the number of students from disadvantaged areas who manage to get into third level is still pathetically low. There is more wealth in the country than ever before but Ireland has the second highest level of poverty in the industrialised world and the lowest wage levels in Europe.

What sort of system is it if we see no progress on education in the midst of a boom? In Britain during the long post war boom, there was a redirection of funding towards education. Some of the benefits of the boom trickled down into the new comprehensive schools. Not so under the Celtic Tiger. Indeed we are hearing the same old arguments that we got in the eighties and nineties. The government will spend as little as it can on education and ask other people to fund it.

Privatisation is the mantra of the FF-PD government and woe betide anyone who, like ASTI, steps outside of this model. Even though rampant marketisation has been discredited elsewhere, our government continues to trot out the economics of neo-liberalism, making it one of the most right wing governments in Europe. Tax subsidies to capital are costing the Exchequer well over £2,500 million a year while a programme of privatisation is being carried through in important areas of the economy with little or no public debate. The primacy of the market is firmly established and there is a clear agenda of cutting back on publicly funded services and attacking public sector pay.

The trade union leaders, rather than challenge neo-liberalism, have joined in the chorus. So deeply involved are they in partnership with the government that they very often sound just like them. They are quick to condemn ASTI for being "outside the fold" of the ICTU. They rush headlong into benchmarking even if they have scarcely thought through what it will mean in the long term for their members. On mega-salaries, they are out of touch and want only to ensure that nothing—least of all a strike—rocks the partnership boat.

Yet partnership has not served teachers well. It has led to an erosion of teachers salaries in real terms, continued scarce resources in education and the subsequent demoralisation of teachers. It has allowed the piecemeal introduction of what



Bernadine O'Sullivan, former President of the ASTI, has called the industrialisation of education.

The need to challenge the privatisation model of education is urgent. In the midst of massive social change in Ireland and disillusion in the existing system, education has become an ideological battleground. While the government is pursuing its agenda, many teachers want to see a fairer system and better rewards for teachers. This debate is not restricted to Ireland. In France for example, the ethos of the market has been challenged and teachers and students have begun to put forward anti-capitalist alternatives.

This pamphlet hopes to contribute to this debate. How can we make Irish education more equal and achievement less class-ridden? How can neo-liberal economics be taken on? How can we change the often alienating and unfulfilling experience of education? Finally, how in a wider political context, can education become about meeting children's needs and developing human potential?

# Class and education in Ireland

**The Irish education system is a deeply class-ridden one. Despite the claims of equality of opportunity, a child's class background determines what type of education they will receive, how long they will remain in education and the results that they will achieve. It will also determine the surroundings in which they learn and the type of environment they return home to in the evening.**

About one quarter of Irish children live in poverty. They experience inequality in every facet of their lives and unfortunately our education system plays a big role in both reflecting and reproducing that inequality. The class you come from shapes the type of education you have. There is a stimulating educational experience out there with all the resources if you can afford it. Only a small number of people can.

Year after year we hear of educational failure, of the levels of illiteracy present among Irish adults, we hear that many children have fallen through the net. Whenever a Minister for Education announces a new far-reaching programme to deal with this area, teachers usually greet these initiatives with some trepidation and a fair measure of cynicism. The Department is always unwilling to commit the necessary resources to rectify this situation.

When initiatives fail to solve the problem, it is used as a stick to beat teachers with, as has been done in the ASTI claim. On the other hand the poor parenting excuse is trundled out by the government and others. But educational failure is a product of poverty rather than the above factors. It is the consistent underfunding of education that has starved schools of the resources needed to provide the best quality education. It is no surprise that the children who underperform in our system are those who endure the worst housing conditions, suffer the highest levels of income poverty and come from areas of cumulative disadvantage where there are high levels of drug abuse and adult illiteracy.

## ***A tale of two education systems***

There is a clear class division within our education system. We have a small but highly influential private school sector. Among the best known private schools are Blackrock College, Clongowes Wood, Belvedere College, St. Columba's College and Alexandra. This sector has produced such influential figures as Richard and John Bruton, Michael Smurfit, Tony O'Reilly Jnr, Ronan Keane, Dermot Gleeson and Paul McGuinness. Fees for a day pupil at Alexandra College are £2,450 with boarders charged £6,465. Blackrock College demands £2,550 from day pupils and £5,950 from those boarding. Clongowes Wood charges at approximately the same rate.

The facilities in these schools are excellent. The students have access to sports facilities that many communities would give their right arm for. Clongowes for example has ten rugby pitches, four soccer pitches, two Gaelic games pitches, ten ten-

nis courts, as well as pool tables, squash and basketball courts, a weights gym, snooker and table tennis tables, an indoor soccer pitch and a swimming pool. Debating, drama and music are among the other extra-curricular activities available.

The exam results that these young people obtain reflect the ideal conditions in which they study. Class sizes are much smaller than in the public sector while sixth year students in Clongowes get their own private room with a radio and study desk.

These schools train the government ministers, the judges, the golden circle of the future. The education offered is geared towards the production of cultured, mentally flexible, confident leaders. It gives every encouragement to making choices and pursuing interests to the limit. For those prepared to go to the limit the reward is great.

*In contrast the majority of children in the public school sector are suffering the consequences of years of under-funding of education.* According to OECD figures the Irish government currently spends just 5% of GDP on education whereas the OECD average is 6.1%. As a result Irish class sizes are among the largest in the advanced world. At primary level Ireland has the second worst pupil teacher ratio in the OECD.

In addition, the INTO highlights every year the fact that young children are attending schools that are rat-infested, inadequate in terms of basic hygiene and hazardous from a safety point of view. Forty schools around the country were listed this year. Meanwhile hundreds of the most vulnerable pupils are being taught in school corridors, porches and cloakrooms due to the chronic lack of space for remedial and resource classes. It is a million miles from the salubrious surroundings of the 215 acre Clongowes College.

Many schools lack basic equipment. For example, more than 65% of post primary schools reported that they had insufficient science equipment.

Support services are seriously under-resourced, impacting most harshly on those children most in need of help. The school psychological service, though recently expanded, is inadequate to deal with the huge backlog of children awaiting assessment. In the 1999/2000 school year 655 parents had to pay privately for assessment. What is even worse is the fact that over 40% of the children deemed to have special needs are currently getting no additional support in school.

Parents of children with autism have been forced to drag the government through the courts in an attempt to win the right for their children to an education. The applied behavioural analysis (ABA) method of education has been shown to be the most effective but as it is based on one-to-one tuition the government is delaying its introduction because of cost factors.

*In the crisis of underfunding in education, it is the most vulnerable sections of society that lose out to the greatest extent. Added to the disadvantages that are faced within the education system is the appalling deprivation that their communities have had to endure.*

In some local authority areas unemployment rates remain at highs of 60% and 70%. The official figure of thirteen thousand heroin users in the Greater Dublin area gives some indication as to the extent of the drug problem. Lack of facilities like play areas and football pitches leave countless more children vulnerable to drug and alcohol abuse.

Forty five thousand families are currently on local authority housing lists. Many families are housed in overcrowded and poorly maintained complexes where the possibility of finding a suitable place to study is a mere pipe dream.

Inadequate diet and clothing, as well as damp living conditions, lead to higher rates of illness and poor attendance at school. All this is born of poverty. A generation of children is growing up enduring the same poverty and disadvantage as their parents did.

The extent of the inequality and disadvantage manifesting itself within the education system as a result is startling. The following statistics give some idea of how deeply entrenched it is.

## **Participation in Third Level Education**

Pat Clancy and Joy Wall (2000) have published the most recent analysis by class background of entrants to higher education. It demonstrates very clearly the extent of the disadvantage faced by some groups in Irish society in terms of their participation in third level education.

■ Young people from high-income backgrounds are fifteen times more likely to go to college than students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Only 2.2% of graduates in the year 2000 came from households that were headed by unskilled or semi-skilled workers, despite the fact that they constitute 17% of the state's population.

■ The social inequality in participation rates is greatest in the more prestigious fields of study. The children of higher professionals and employers make up more than 55% of those taking law courses with just 0.5% coming from unskilled backgrounds and 3.1% from semi-skilled. The latter groups have their highest representation in the Institutes of Technology as opposed to the university sector.

■ Lest anyone think that it is purely merit that determines who accesses higher education in this country, the revelation that 9% of students from unskilled backgrounds with four passes get to third level, whereas 30% of those with the same results from a higher professional family do, exposes this myth.

■ Despite a lot of talk from government in recent years about improving access very little changed during the nineties. The number of disadvantaged students participating in third level rose by just 0.02% in eight years while the number of children of "salaried employees" going to college remained at 1980 levels. In contrast participation by the top groups in society has reached saturation point. 90% of those from higher professional backgrounds go on to third level education.

■ Fee-paying secondary schools have transfer rates to third level of over 70% in contrast to the community and vocational sectors where these rates average between 30 and 40%.

It is clear that a student's class background is the key determinant of whether or not they will proceed to third level. An individual has a much better chance of accessing higher education if they come from a higher professional background, their father is in employment and they have attended a fee-paying school. Not surprisingly, then, in an area like Clondalkin in West Dublin, where unemployment rates in local authority areas can reach over 70%, the rate of admission to third level educa-



tion is 4.5%, compared with 54% for Rathgar, a wealthy, middle-class area.

### **Early School Leaving and Poor Attendance**

Internationally Ireland ranks only moderately well in terms of the numbers who complete the senior cycle in secondary school. According to the ESRI over 15,000 young people leave school every year without sitting the Leaving Cert, almost 6,000 leave with no qualifications while 1,000 children fail to make the transition to second level.

Research has found, unsurprisingly, that early school leavers tend to be from low-income backgrounds. A study by the National Economic and Social Forum in 1997 found that 85% of early leavers come from working class origins or small farms, while 55% are from families where their fathers are unemployed.

An INTO study revealed that student's from disadvantaged primary schools were generally over three times more likely to drop out than the general population.

### **Educational Attainment/Literacy**

Recent findings on literacy levels among those of school-going age point to serious shortcomings in the ability of the education system to provide even the most basic education to many children in primary school. According to the Department of Education and Science (1998), approximately 8% of pupils leave primary school with "low levels of literacy"; in other words, about 5,000 students per year enter post-primary schools with reading or writing difficulties.

Once again these problems are concentrated in areas of high disadvantage and amongst children who come predominantly from low income or unemployed households. One recent study found that the disadvantaged areas of Clondalkin and the inner city compare very unfavourably with the much more affluent Rathgar. For example, all third class children in the Rathgar school examined were ahead of their chronological reading age, while only 24% and 7.6% were ahead in Clondalkin and Dublin's inner city respectively. Startlingly, all children in the fifth and sixth classes studied in both disadvantaged areas were behind in terms of reading skills, while not one child in Rathgar was.

Earlier research on sixth class students in Dublin's inner city indicated that almost one-quarter of children attending school in the inner city are regarded by their teachers as being unable to cope with the writing demands of everyday life.

### **Local Funding - Making matters worse**

The advantages those who attend private schools enjoy have been made clear. But there are also divisions in the public school system and its funding. The way in which the funding of education has been structured in this country is highly influenced by the Church's role in education. 100% state funding of schools does not exist because the Church insisted on retaining control of the system. 85% of running costs are met by the state, leaving the Church to provide the rest. In reality it is local communities that have footed the extra bill. This system heightens the inequali-

ties between schools. Schools in wealthier areas obviously have a greater pool of resources to dip into while schools in poorer areas struggle to make up the shortfall. This system has further heightened the class divisions in education. A fully state funded secular education system would go some way to solving the problems in this area. None of the political parties, including Labour have raised objections to this state of affairs. A former Education Minister, Niamh Bhreathnach, oversaw a situation where the Catholic church was given sweeping powers of control over the "religious ethos" of teachers.

*It is clear that the vast majority of children are losing out from this education system, and teachers who work in underfunded schools are enduring working conditions that should not be tolerated.* It is an indictment of 14 years of social partnership that only very limited improvements have been made. The leaders of the teaching unions often sold inadequate pay deals as part of wider packages that promised real change in terms of the number of teachers and the amount of money available for resources. Much was made of the "non pay", educational aspects of the PPF. The PESP, the PCW and the PPF all contained broad promises for improvements. The widespread funds injection promised has not materialised. Teachers are involved in collecting Tesco tokens as a substitute for proper investment in our schools. As a result of accepting the empty promises of partnership deals, we have neither decent pay nor properly resourced schools.

The fact that children are failed by our education system is not a reflection of the quality of teaching, parenting skills or the oft-cited children's "low levels of intelligence". Instead it is a reflection of the unequal society we live in. All of these factors combine to make it almost impossible for these children to reach their potential. Overcrowded classrooms and resulting teacher stress combine to make primary education a stifling rather than stimulating experience for children. At second level it is stressful and often demoralising. Third level remains an impossible dream for many.

# Education and the market

Throughout the discussions on teachers' pay, we hear the ongoing mantra, repeated ad nauseum: teachers must be prepared to accept private sector conditions of employment. Buzz words like accountability, performance appraisal, and more efficiency are used. This change is presented as an improvement in education, and as an opportunity for teachers and as good for children. It is neither. Rather than giving the education system the much-needed resources it needs to function, teachers' performance is targeted instead.

There is a concerted effort to introduce the market into all aspects of education. The Department wants market-based assessment of teachers and schools and it wants market values to be an integral part of what we teach. In the 2001 Budget, the Minister allocated £250,000 specifically for teaching transition year students about the enterprise culture.

The Irish government is aping what has already happened in Britain—at great cost to students and overburdened teachers.

## ***The market and teachers pay***

At the heart of the introduction of the market into education is Benchmarking and performance related pay aspects of the PPF. It is implied that through the mechanism of the benchmarking process we should embrace private sector conditions and methods in the education sector. The current debate over teachers' pay is not just about levels of pay therefore but it is also about the basis on which teachers are paid. The government is attempting to introduce productivity models of payment into education. If they succeed it will have serious implications not just for teachers but also for students and the whole of the education system. Benchmarking will consider "the way reward systems are structured in the private sector" in future pay claims. What does this mean?

It will lead to the individualisation of pay awards and seriously undermine the ability of teachers to act collectively to win increases for the whole profession. It will make pay a matter for the individual teacher and focus all the time on the individual teacher delivering productivity in order to get a rise. In effect it will involve the breaking of the common pay scale.

The warning signs are there and the implications of all this are clear from an examination of developments within the English education system where performance management and PRP have been introduced. As part of the performance management system all teachers in England have their performance in the classroom subjected to yearly review in order to obtain their annual increment. This involves a lot of extra work as teachers are obliged to provide written targets for each child as well as have their performance in the classroom inspected once a year.

Furthermore teachers who apply to go "above the threshold", in other words to avail of the pay rise they already deserve, are required to fill out a very detailed form providing information as to their pupils' progress and their own involvement in extra curricular activities. Their application is then considered by the head teacher and an external assessor and the details provided, along with their performance in the classroom, determines whether or not they will receive an increase.

The result in Britain is a demoralised and fast shrinking teaching profession weighed down by bureaucracy. Form filling and the writing of lesson plans takes the place of child centred education.

The British civil service has PRP and studies there have found that women and ethnic minorities lose out. This is not surprising. From the point of view of women teachers, for example, it is clear that the lack of state funded childcare makes it more difficult for them to participate in extra curricular activities (details of which must be included for consideration on the British PRP application form and is part of the INTO contribution model of PRP). Also, models of PRP based on extra qualifications and training also discriminate against women as again women are less likely to be in a position to free themselves up from their childcare responsibilities in the evenings in order to undertake courses of study.

The justification for the introduction of PRP and the principles of the market into education in Britain was the need to make teachers more accountable, to reward good teachers and to raise standards. This sounds very similar to some of the statements made in Irish government circles and should sound alarm bells for parents, students and teachers. We should vigorously resist the development of an education system that is more results based and less focused on the needs of the individual children in its care.

## ***The Market – Bad for students***

From a student's point of view productivity and performance based pay systems inevitably mean increased assessment. English children are formally tested at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16. Test scores are used as one of the indicators of pupil progress. The introduction of PRP into the Irish education system would inevitably lead to the introduction of more standardised testing of children.

The effects on children of formal testing are appalling. It brands some children as failures from a very early age and for many this label becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Two studies in early 1999 found that one in five English children under ten years old was suffering from stress or mental illness caused, in part at least, by testing at school. The education that children receive is, inevitably, increasingly geared towards tests. *In addition if pay is based on how well students perform in exams, there is a financial pressure on teachers to move to schools where wealth confers on students the type of advantages that include greater success within the education system.* As a result inner city schools and schools in disadvantaged areas bear the brunt of the recruitment crisis.

In Northern Ireland the 11 plus exam embodies all the worst elements of the culture of testing. This exam is tied into a policy of selection and was abolished in England as the benefits of comprehensive education became apparent in the 1970s.



It operates to separate those who are suited to an 'academic' education from those who are worthy merely of a 'vocational' education. This kind of system discriminates against working class pupils. The Gallagher research report showed that 47% of primary school children in Northern Ireland received coaching outside school, at an average cost of £15 an hour. Gallagher found that parents from a deprived inner city area were unaware that half those sitting the 11+ had paid tutors, and when they heard the cost involved, "were unanimous in their assertions that the cost would be beyond their capacity to pay".

Dividing children in this way is saying that those destined to become factory fodder don't need to learn French, history or other 'academic' subjects. It is deeply insulting and damaging to working class children.

Education is already a rat race as young people are forced to compete for scarce college or grammar school places, and the testing model used at second level is a poor indicator of the individual student's true ability. Continuous assessment that allows scope for project work, cooperative working and experimentation offers a far more valuable approach which does not distort the learning process in the same way that exams do. This will not be done, as this broader analysis of children's needs and abilities is not necessary for today's modern, economic based system.

Testing and the exam system serve a very important role in capitalist society. Standardised tests are presented as proof that success is the result of ability and not class power, and they popularise the belief that those who do the bulk of the humdrum work in society do so because they lack ability.

*The underfunding of education has created a space whereby private business is beginning to gain a foothold within our education system. This is part of a global trend towards the introduction of the market and market principles into public services. It will have very serious implications for the education system in the long term if it is not resisted now by teachers, parents and students.*

### ***The Market - exploiting under-resourced schools***

Schools are becoming increasingly dependent on companies like Tesco to provide them with computers. This is by no means a recent phenomenon. Any child of the eighties will remember the subtle pressure to eat McVities United chocolate bars at lunchtime in order to get their school, ironically enough, state of the art sports equipment. Schools inevitably in these circumstances get into the situation of endorsing and promoting products. This is taken a step further in a small number of schools where notice-board space is hired out for advertising in a desperate attempt to supplement inadequate state funding.

Another worrying development is the introduction into schools of programmes like Junior Achievement. The expressed aim of this particular programme is to ensure that every child has a fundamental understanding of the free enterprise system. Those who run the JA foundation believe that this work should start early, beginning their programmes in the infant classroom under such innocuous titles as Ourselves and Our Families.

JA began in America in 1919 and today operates in 108 countries. JA literature boasts that it has been successful in promoting a pro-business climate, especially in developing countries; in fostering economic literacy by helping the general populace recognise the

necessity of a viable private sector; and in teaching the next generation of entrepreneurs, managers, policy makers and voters the value of free enterprise.

The companies and foundations that support and fund JA include British Petroleum, General Motors, McDonalds, Coca Cola, Heinz and the Exxon Corporation. Meanwhile in Ireland financial contributors include AIB, NIB, Citibank, Esat Digifone and Smurfits.

A quick look at any one of these companies and their ethics raises serious questions as to whether they are suitable role models for our children. Citibank, which is very involved in Junior Achievement in Dublin City, has a very worrying CV. It is part of Citigroup the largest financial institution in North America with branches all over the world. At present this banking group is funding a vast number of questionable projects in the developing world.

It is providing loans for palm plantations in Indonesia that will have serious environmental consequences for the region. Large quantities of fertilisers and insecticides will pollute land and rivers while the indigenous peoples of this area will have their livelihood destroyed.

In Papua New Guinea it has arranged loans for the Chevron oil company to drill wells and construct oil pipelines through the rainforests. It has an appalling record of lending to undemocratic regimes, including Apartheid South Africa at a time when sanctions were in place. It is one of the Western banks that has made superprofits in the process of collecting third world debt while the people of this region suffered abject poverty and cuts in the most basic of services.

The JA programmes are conducted by volunteers usually from the sponsoring businesses who spend up to an hour a week for the duration of the programme in the classroom during the school day. Many disadvantaged schools feel obliged to take on these programmes in the hope that these businesses will provide extra resources for their schools in the form of minibuses or other school equipment. It is a further example of how vulnerable underfunding by government is leaving our school system to the influence of business.

These developments are echoing developments within the education system in the US where they have reached extremes that should emphasise the need for us to act now to prevent the subversion of true education by market values. It was budget cuts and the need to find alternative sources of funding that allowed private corporations to gain a foothold in the US education system. As Naomi Klein documents in her book *No Logo* it began with brand name sponsorship and evolved into those brands forcing themselves onto the core curriculum. Some corporations recruited "partner" teachers to develop class lessons based on creating new ad campaigns for products. Nike produced an "Air-to-Earth" lesson kit which asked children to build a Nike sneaker to help raise awareness about the company's environmentally sensitive production process. Obviously no consideration was given to Nike's practice of using labour in sweatshop factories.

In the US, allowing advertising into schools did not take the form of one big policy decision but instead involved thousands of little decisions. The American experience is a warning for us not to ignore the huge long-term implications of decisions that are currently being made with regard to how open schools should be to private forms of funding.

## ***The market in Education—closer than we think***

The Private Finance Initiative in Northern Ireland is therefore also very worrying. The concept was invented by the Tories and has since been made its own by Labour and implemented by Sinn Féin ministers. Under this system grants and subsidies are given to private firms to take over and build facilities which are then bought back by the public sector. St. Genevieve's High School in Belfast got its badly needed school buildings through a £14 million PFI deal. Studies on PFI in Britain have shown the schemes to be notoriously expensive, with the costs sometimes five times more than private projects. In Scotland it is estimated in one report that its £2.7 billion PFI programme is £2 billion more costly than if it had been paid for with public money.

In the south Public Private Partnerships in the education sector have begun with the granting of a single contract to construct five secondary school buildings in counties Cork, Clare, Sligo and Monaghan to a private company called Jarvis plc. Jarvis plc will design, build, finance and operate the schools while the government will make a "unitary payment" similar to a mortgage. After twenty five years ownership will transfer to the Government.

It is clear that the market is encroaching more and more on the education system. It can be seen on every front: in the way teachers are to be paid, in the content of the curriculum and in the growing moves to privatise all public services. However the push towards this is not just coming at a national level, it is reflecting larger developments at an international level.

The attacks on education and other public services are, in fact, going to be intensified in the coming years as global capitalism seeks to spread its influence into areas that have previously been protected from its worst excesses. The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), agreed at the World Trade Organisation in 1994 and now due to be extended, commits its members to "achieve a progressively higher level of liberalisation" in their service sectors. The services that come under consideration include water delivery, transport, rubbish collection, healthcare and education. This could mean that a freely-provided state-run education system would be designated a monopoly and a barrier to free trade to companies who want to sell education services for profit.

The implications are frightening not just in Ireland but right across the world. An increasing number of people are recognising this and a movement against corporate greed and global capitalism is being consolidated. It has its most obvious manifestation in the demonstrations and protests targeting institutions like the WTO, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the G8—institutions that have a key role in the running of the world economy.

Large numbers of people are beginning to mobilise against the onslaughts of global capitalism and the neo-liberal agenda of which the GATS is a part alongside global warming and the devastating burden of debt in the third world.

Teachers, students and parents need to be in the forefront of this movement and play a leading role in resisting GATS and other moves at a global level to attack public services. The battleground has been laid and it is imperative that we fight to defend education from the market and offer a different vision for the future.

## **Education under capitalism**

**The underfunding of our education system, the piecemeal introduction of the market, the preferential access to education for those from the upper classes and the poverty of education for those worse off are not simply aberrations of the Irish education system. They are evident in education systems right across the globe. They reflect the unequal and class ridden capitalist societies that we live in.**

Class is not mainly a cultural question or even about 'status' but is rather a question of who controls the 'means of production', the industries, the banks and the institutions of capitalist society, and the majority that must sell their labour to the capitalists.

Education serves a dual purpose in capitalist society. Capitalism needs an educated workforce. Education provides this; it provides the skills and training that are necessary for the different classes in society in order to carry out their varying roles in the economy. However, capitalism fears a workforce that challenges existing privilege and the economic priorities of the system in which we live. Education therefore seeks to inculcate us with the values of capitalist society and train us into habits of thought that serve to prop up the prevailing class structure. From the outset a child is encouraged to respect and obey authority unquestioningly, and to accept competition, through the points race, as the way of the world.

### ***Schools for the system***

The opening up of education to the mass of the population was a massive gain for the working class. Ordinary people have always placed huge value on formal learning. In Ireland the hedge schools are a testament to this, when despite British repression ways were found to ensure that children continued to receive education. Access to education is something that socialists defend and wish to extend to all sections of society. This access should be equal rather than the differentiated one that was illustrated in the section on class and education.

However, the extension of formal education across the country was not motivated by philanthropy. The needs and changes in the labour market were the greatest influence on change in education. Despite the progressive educational ideas of the Enlightenment thinkers, in particular Rousseau, it was not until the needs of a developing industry dictated it, that education became available to the masses. Today it is still the economy and its needs that determine the quantity and content of the education that students receive.

The Investment in Education report published in 1960 shaped the modern education system in Ireland. It was part of a major restructuring of the Irish economy which involved the opening up of the economy to foreign investment in order to boost profitability.



The report stressed the crucial role that education could play in the development of a modern economy, and pointed to the fact that a trained, highly skilled workforce would have a positive effect on Irish competitiveness. Technological development was leading to changes in industry and production methods. A broader education, going beyond basic literacy and numeracy skills, was required if the workforce was to be able to adapt and compete with the rest of the world.

According to the report (1965; 204), "if the proposition that education has a beneficial effect on productivity is accepted, measures which tend to bring the educational levels of the labour force as a whole closer to present day standards should be promoted".

The impact of the report was obvious in the policy decisions that followed -more comprehensive schools were established around the regions, offering a broader range of subjects, while regional technical colleges were also set up. The most significant response to IIE, however, was the introduction of free post-primary education for all in 1967. It constituted the key mechanism for producing an adequately skilled workforce.

Nearly thirty years later, the arguments of IIE were to be echoed in a major report on industrial development in Ireland, the Culliton Report (1992). Once again, education was examined in the context of the contribution it could make to improving the competitiveness of the Irish economy, and it was stressed that the fostering of usable and marketable skills should be a priority within the educational system. Investment in education was perceived again as an investment in people as economic units. The arguments in both reports underpin the philosophy that continues to dominate education provision in Ireland in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Technological developments occur at such a fast pace today that the ability of the workforce to adjust to rapid change has become increasingly important. Therefore the necessity of providing a broader education and increasing the numbers staying in education longer continues to be vital. Having received the type of education deemed suitable to their economic role young people are then fed into the labour market at the appropriate level.

There is a contradiction in the way capitalism deals with education. The world-wide post war boom allowed for the widespread expansion of education internationally. However, the current economic picture of capitalist instability with short-term booms followed by ever deepening recessions has led to a pressure to keep spending down. That is why on a global level state funded education services are under attack.

### ***Education, hierarchy and the myth of meritocracy***

Irrespective of how much money is spent, there is another role that education plays: to instil in people the idea that the divisions that exist in society are, on the whole, legitimate ones. The way in which the education system is structured, the way in which schools are run and the content of what is taught all reflect and reinforce the class society in which we live.

Through testing and exams individual competitiveness is encouraged, and indeed established as the way things should be society. Young people compete against each other for decent grades and college places. Success will always be at the expense of someone else and is defined in the narrow terms of exam performance. Failure becomes the fault of the individual while success is based purely on merit. The education system acts to legitimise class differences based on wealth; power and influence by making the mass of the population feel they have not earned the right to be successful.

The content of what is taught while always presented in a very apolitical way is heavily class biased. History is a perfect example. The focus is on the contribution of individuals to the making of present day society. Crucial examples of the power of ordinary people to change society are relegated to minor passing references at the end of the chapter. Even if individual teachers want to highlight the Russian revolution or the role of workers during the War of Independence they have limited scope to do so, as the Leaving Cert exam question dictates what has to be covered in greatest detail. It is further evidence for the majority of young people that their role in society is to accept the way things are organised and to work unquestioningly in whatever circumstances are presented to them.

Education at all levels is organised along very hierarchical lines. A small number of people in the Department of Education have huge control over what goes on within schools and classrooms. While we can have involvement through our unions in the area of new curricula and exams, we do not have real say in the improvement of staffing levels and resources that would make them achievable. The new scheme for drawing down money for disadvantaged schools is a good example of the lack of real consultation in the education system. Literature arrived in primary schools, without any prior consultation, demanding the carrying out of extra duties by teachers and principals after school hours in order to receive the additional funding.

At a school level there is a hierarchy with principals as the key decision-makers and the amount of collective decision-making dependent on his or her way of operating. At best it will involve teaching staff but it will never include student input. The hierarchy is most pronounced in the classroom where the teacher is an authority figure. Children are encouraged to accept orders, to do what they are told and obey rules and regulations that they rarely have any role in formulating.

It is no wonder then that education is such a deadening and alienating experience for working class people. Instead of freeing children to explore and understand the world around them, education becomes a straitjacket designed to teach people their place in society. Instead of focusing on the needs of the student, it serves the needs of the economy and reproduces class society. Instead of developing the full potential of children it teaches them merely how to pass exams. High absentee rates, as well as being a reflection of broader problems in society, are a reflection of the degree of alienation that young people experience within the school system.

Teachers also suffer greatly within this system. Many teachers are highly motivated and deeply committed to their students. Teachers have always been to the fore in resisting changes in education that lead to more pressure on students and

more restrictive teaching methods. However, in the face of a system in which these pressures are brought to bear every day a more fundamental transformation is necessary.

In educating people for work the system has raised the horizons of ordinary people and given them a greater capacity to understand the way the world is run. This gives workers a greater confidence to challenge their leaders and a greater confidence as to their ability to change society. It is this that holds out the greatest hope of transforming our education system into a tool for liberation.

## ***Teachers, workers and education***

The fight for teachers pay is an urgent one as is the fight for more funding for education. If in the midst of a booming economy there is a failure to invest in education, then we can be sure that when the boom is over all hell will break loose. The key question is how do we win the fight to defend education?

For years now teaching unions have been to the forefront in highlighting the serious inadequacies of educational provision in this country. Report after report has made sensible recommendations yet successive governments, despite promises to the contrary, have failed to act. Limited improvements have been made in recent years with, for example, the introduction of some schemes in disadvantaged schools. However even these have been half-hearted. Years of asking nicely for improvements in funding has not worked.

Likewise years of delivering change without asking for anything in return has not led the government to reward our compliance. Despite the introduction of new curricula, the embracing of new subjects, and reskilling at our own expense the government, through benchmarking, is looking for more productivity before any increase (above the cost of living ones that the PPF barely delivered) is even considered.

The ASTI campaign of industrial action raised a serious challenge to the government to act on the pay issue. Teachers have been "reasonable" and it has not worked. Now it is perfectly reasonable to adopt another strategy.

The change of tactics in the ASTI came from members themselves in direct defiance of the wishes of their paid officials. It was a victory for democracy in the union that the vote against the PPF was not overturned by the actions of the leadership. In contrast TUI members have found that despite voting against the PPF their leaders accepted the revised terms of the PPF on their behalf and the union rushed headlong into the benchmarking process.

It is clear that if teachers in the three unions took action together and shut down all schools that the government would have little option but to deliver on our demands for better pay and a better education system. This is not holding the government or the children of this country to ransom but instead involves posing a real challenge to the running down of the education system. In the course of the ASTI dispute the government engaged in the shedding of many crocodile tears for the future of thousands of young people, apparently oblivious to the fact that they are failing these and many more children everyday.

The union leaderships pose the biggest obstacle to the forging of unity between

all teachers. Tied into social partnership and its cosy relationship to government they act time and time again to hold back struggle. They constantly raise doubts about the viability of taking action, condemn strikes as weapons from a previous era and point to the unpopularity of being seen to be too militant. But they can be challenged and forced to fight. The experience of the ASTI shows this most clearly. A leadership that went on a work-to-rule following Conference 2000 went on to lead a major strike.

Right across the public and private sector workers have begun to take action. Far from being outmoded, strikes are increasingly being recognised as the most legitimate way to get a fair deal from government and employers. The nurses, train and bus drivers, Aer Lingus workers as well as taxi drivers, building workers and shop workers have been on strike. Teachers are part of this growing militancy. All of this action puts pressure on the government to respond to the demands of ordinary working people. Without challenging them, the wealth that we have all created will continue to flow into the pockets of rich businessmen and multinational corporations.

Real improvements can be won in our education system. Class sizes can be reduced by training and employing more teachers, grants can be increased so as to allow building work to be carried out on schools, more computers and sports equipment can instantly be provided, college places can be expanded so that anyone who wishes to pursue their education can do so. And of course teachers can be paid a decent wage with a shortened pay scale. This is not a fight for teachers alone but is part of a broader struggle to defend public services. Parents, students and all other workers have an interest in winning this battle. All it requires is for the priorities that underpin the allocation of money in our society to be altered. This is something that we have to fight for through our trade unions and by using our power as workers. But it is achievable.

However in the longer term we need to consider how to affect more fundamental change in education. This pamphlet has sought to illustrate how education is very much a function of the wider society in which it exists. It therefore follows that if we want fundamental change in education then we must be part of the struggle to deliver fundamental change in society.



# Education and socialism

## *Education under socialism*

It is perhaps difficult to envisage what a proper education system would be like. Teachers and students are so bogged down in the alienating education process we operate in now. However, history provides some examples of what education can look like when it is truly democratised. Every attempt to transform education in this direction has occurred in the context of broader social upheavals. In the 1960s people took to the streets across the globe to fight for women's rights, black civil rights and workers' rights. It was a time when a huge questioning of the system occurred and alternatives were looked for. It is no surprise that debates about education were part of this process. Comprehensives and mixed ability teaching offered greater possibilities to allow every individual child to flourish, while some questioned the whole value of the school as an institution and raised a debate about whether schooling should be decentralised into the community.

In France the General Strike of 1968 involved the occupation of schools by pupils with about one third of teachers actively participating. It provided the opportunity for practical experimentation with a different model of education. One pupil described what it felt like to take over the school:

"Upon occupying the buildings the pupils for the first time felt at home ... Many observers imagined the pupils would take advantage of the occasion to run wild and even damage the place. But why should they damage their materials, smash up their classrooms, sabotage their own work?"

One school embarked on a three week educational experiment which pupils described as working in the following way:

"Each group organised its work as it wanted, studying one subject in the morning and deciding how to run the timetable. From 12 to 12.30pm the pupils of each class: (1) decided the aim of the operation and wrote down conclusions which would help them when they returned to the matter; (2) prepared the next day's work, deciding who would introduce the subject, what books to bring etc. In the afternoon there were political discussions (in the widest sense of the term), cultural activities, theatrical works, the reading of passages, films until four".

The school was run on a completely democratic basis. Delegates were elected from each class and from the teachers and other school workers for various committees. The principal was to be elected every three years and subject to recall by a two thirds majority of the school Committee for Joint Control.

It was a short term experiment that ended as the wave of strikes subsided but it nevertheless points to a different yet totally achievable and workable way of organising education. What is particularly interesting is the level of participation of students in their own learning and the broad curriculum that they followed which emphasised

politics and the arts.

The changes that French pupils implemented spontaneously in 1968 echo the thorough overhaul of the education system that occurred in Russia after the 1917 Revolution. The whole basis on which Russian society was organised had changed with the emergence of the first workers' state in history. It was a collective society in which power rested with the mass of the people. Workers took over and ran their factories, labourers and peasants seized the land and the oppressed nations of Russia were given full freedom. The full equality of men and women was recognised and homosexuality was dropped from the criminal code.

The changes in society transformed education, as the ideals that drove the revolution were translated into the area of learning. The first Education Act of 1918 reflected the spirit of the revolution. In the Preamble the importance of each individual's development was stressed

"The personality shall remain the highest value in the socialist culture. This personality however can develop its inclinations in all possible luxury only in a harmonious society of equals. We do not forget the right of an individual to his or her own peculiar development. It is not necessary for us to cut short a personality, to cheat it, to cast it into iron moulds, because the stability of the socialist community is based not on the uniformity of barracks, not on an artificial drill, not on religious and aesthetic deceptions but on an actual solidarity of interests."

There followed some of the most exciting and far-reaching changes in education that had ever taken place. Linguists like Vygotsky revolutionised ways of looking at child learning. This ferment of ideas lasted for about a decade until Stalinist reaction overturned the Revolution and education, once again in an unequal class ridden society, was put back in a straitjacket.

The philosophy of the workers' state was to link theory with practice in what was known as polytechnical education. The "project" method was widely adopted, where children collectively undertook a socially useful task. Through working on this task children learned crafts; tested, applied and developed theories and enhanced their creative skills. It took learning beyond the classroom, it moved away from a system of pre-packaged information fed to children from an authority figure and linked education in a very real and useful way to the world outside the school gate. It broke down the artificial division between mental and manual labour that is a feature of capitalism. The priority was to provide a broad and general education for as long as possible with specialisation only occurring in later years. The aim was to allow young people to develop their full potential and to enable them to contribute to society in the best way that they could.

Exams and tests were abolished and university education made free to all who wanted it. All pupils were expected to go to school, until the age of seventeen. Schools were run on a thoroughly democratic basis. The teachers role was described by Pinkevich, a prominent educationalist, as follows, "the teacher plays the role of organiser, assistant, instructor and older comrade, but not the role of superior officer" An internal school committee of pupils, teachers and ancillary staff elected a head who was subject to recall if he or she performed badly, and a school soviet of pupils,



staff, parents, the local area soviet and trade unions maintained general oversight of the school as part of the community.

Rules and regulations, when needed, were drawn up by the pupils themselves with the active participation of the teachers and were enforced by the collective.

A huge thirst for education was unleashed among ordinary people in the process of taking power. Greek tragedies were performed in town squares to large audiences and books were read in huge numbers. Knowledge and learning became part of the process of liberation as people cast off years of oppression and exploitation.

The experience of Russia in the days after the revolution illustrate how education can be transformed into a tool of liberation. Freed from its function of reproducing a class society, education can provide the opportunity for the full development of the human personality and unleash the great potential in all human beings.

The desire to understand the world that is evident right from the earliest moments in a child's life is quickly stunted by capitalism. In a socialist society it would be encouraged and given free expression. The benefits to humanity of a truly democratic and participatory education system are potentially enormous. All the talent that is currently wasted would be harnessed to the benefit of all of society. The placing of the world's wealth and resources in the hands of the many and not the few creates the conditions for using them to meet the needs of humanity and not merely to make profits for a minority.

It is possible for us to win some changes to the education system under capitalism in order to make it more focused on the needs of children. However, radically transforming education is clearly linked to changing the wider society. Now is a time when many are questioning the values of the market and of capitalism. For the first time since the sixties there are serious stirrings of opposition to the bleak uniformity of the market. Anti-capitalist protests have identified corporate capitalism as the main obstacle to meeting peoples' needs. Nowhere is this more apparent than in education. It is time to bring these arguments into the educational arena. We need to begin the fight to transform this society into one where human need is placed before profit and human potential before the straitjacket of the market. Struggles within education are also part of a wider fight to achieve a socialist society.

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## **Class and Education in the Celtic Tiger by Deirdre Cronin**

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**We are in the midst of a prolonged boom yet class sizes are among the largest in Europe, schools remain inadequately resourced and the number of students from disadvantaged areas who manage to get into third level is still pathetically low.**

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